
Being Buddha, Staying Woke: Racial Formation in Black Buddhist Writing

Adeana McNicholl*

This article challenges academic explorations of Orientalism as an interaction between a white West and an Asian East within the context of American Buddhist communities. Taking as its focus twentieth- and twenty-first-century semiautobiographical writings by black American Buddhists, this article explores how black American Buddhists engage with Buddhist teachings to understand themselves as racialized subjects on local, national, and transnational levels. It argues that black Buddhists' writings rework Orientalist discourse to empower black Buddhists within predominantly white communities. These writings challenge assumptions that the normative Buddhist subject is white, male, and heteronormative. Additionally, they portray the Buddha as a social reformer enlightened to the operation of racial, gender, and sexual inequalities. This portrayal of the Buddha allows black Buddhists to articulate a counter-narrative to hegemonic Western authority while paradoxically constructing their own romantic vision of Asia as the "Other" to the West.

*Adeana McNicholl, Department of Religious Studies, Stanford University, 450 Serra Mall, Building 70, Stanford, CA, 94035, USA. Email: adeanamc@stanford.edu. I would like to thank Kathryn Gin Lum, Alex Kaloyanides, Paul Harrison, Judith Weisenfeld, and the anonymous reviewers for reading drafts of this article and providing their feedback. This article is all the better for having benefited from their insight.

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A somewhat idle, somewhat serious question. Has anyone ever tried explaining the Sanskrit epithet 'Buddha' as 'The Woke'? As in, that man is not just woke, he is Woke. What do you think, how does that work, in early third-millennium English?

—Alan G. Wagner, October 29, 2016

staying woke. literally.

—angel Kyodo williams, November 10, 2016

IN LATE OCTOBER 2016, an unusual conversation cropped up in the Facebook group “Scholars of Buddhist Studies,” a closed group comprising approximately 900 graduate students, post-docs, and professors studying Buddhism and Asian religions. Posts by group members typically include topics like upcoming conferences, new books, questions about locating primary sources, poignant news articles, and the occasional pedagogical question. In this sense, Alan Wagner’s question, focusing on pedagogical approaches for teaching undergraduate students, was not entirely out of place, but the topic was unfamiliar to many group members. In asking whether anyone has explained the “Buddha” as “the Woke,” Wagner made a purposeful connection between the translation of “buddha” (“the awakened one”) and the recent use of the term “woke” to refer to someone as “awakened” to the operation of racism, hetero-sexism, and gendered discourse within society. Some of the contributors to the comment thread were not receptive to this contemporary reading of Buddhist terminology. Before the debate could begin, the word “woke” had to be defined for those who were unfamiliar with the term. After receiving a provisional definition (“being awakened to one’s historical and political identity”), a few commenters remained skeptical about the appropriateness of using this term to describe the Buddha. Some scholars were concerned about the improper use of “woke” as a grammatically incorrect tense of the English verb “awake” and about its inappropriateness as a translation of the Sanskrit.¹ One person showed particular disdain for the use of neologisms when translating Buddhist texts, asking whether one would be forced to render “The Buddha said, excellent, excellent!” as “The Woke said: Yo! Dope, man. . .” The philological criticisms caused Wagner to edit his post to clarify the matter: “I do mean just ‘explaining’ here, not formal translation. Say, in speaking with Millennials, using English in fresh and immediate ways—to ask what it could mean to be woke in the deepest possible way, to be Woke, and how that compares to how we understand ‘Buddha.’”

¹Since this conversation, Oxford Dictionary added the word “woke” to its catalog.

Some community members were less concerned with the philological implications of translating “buddha” as “woke” and instead debated whether the use of this term would be anachronistic. These scholars argued that during the time in which the Buddha reportedly lived there was no concept of race. In addition, while “buddha” is conventionally translated as one who is “awakened,” they argued this awakening referred to an existential truth, and not to societal struggle and inequalities. One scholar was additionally concerned that the use of the term “woke” might amount to the cultural appropriation of African American political struggle. This group of critics, in short, believed the representation of the Buddha as a racially enlightened figure was an anachronistic, romanticized vision of Indian Buddhism and of the Buddha as a radical reformer—a vision rooted in histories of Orientalist constructions of Asian religions.

Less than two weeks after this event, angel Kyodo williams, a queer black Zen Buddhist leader, in what was likely a response to the recent election of President Trump, posted on her Facebook page two simple sentences: “staying woke. literally.” While williams’s business page boasts over 3,500 followers, her personal page, to which this comment was posted, at the time had a similar number of followers as the “Scholars of Buddhist Studies” group. However, in contrast to the Buddhist Studies scholars, nobody who followed williams’s posts seemed confused by her use of the term. For those familiar with williams’s writings on Buddhism, blackness, race, and embodiment, it was perfectly clear how she was playing with the word “woke” and the connections she was drawing between herself, Buddhism, and the idea of being “awake.” Contrary to the expectations of Buddhist studies scholars, williams was purposely playing with the relationship between the Buddhist concept of “awakening” and the modern word “woke” to frame her awareness of the operation of institutionalized racial, gender, and sexual inequalities within a Buddhist worldview.

This article investigates how black Buddhists like williams use Buddhist discourse in their writings to think about themselves as racialized subjects, and what this may reveal about how black Buddhists position themselves within local, national, and transnational networks of racialization. These semiautobiographical texts from the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries by (educated, middle class) black Buddhists frequently situate the life story of the Buddha with reference to the civil rights movement. Such writings position the Buddha as a fellow person of color and as a social reformer who was awakened to the truth of suffering caused by false constructions of identity, including race, gender, caste, and class. In other words, in the context of these writings, one could say that the Buddha was, in fact, Woke. This article argues that these writings are part of a broader context of Buddhists of color reworking Orientalist discourses to

empower themselves within white Buddhist communities that have marginalized minorities. By setting the Buddha's life-story with reference to the American racial state, black Buddhists do not merely generate a vision of themselves as racialized subjects within the local/national context of the United States. Rather, by reinterpreting the Buddha's life-story, they participate in a broader discourse of black internationalism and the crafting of black identity on a transnational level. Black Buddhist discourses, by portraying the Buddha as a social reformer, employ a unique vision of Asia and the "East," a vision that black Buddhists find solidarity with and then employ against the "West." These discourses are an example of Afro-Orientalism, a counter-discourse that shares some features with Orientalism, but also forms an independent critique of Orientalism in the West (Mullen 2004). Black Buddhist discourses do not simply mimic or reject Orientalist constructions of West and East, but rather, selectively rework Orientalist discourses to create a counter-narrative to hegemonic Western authority while paradoxically constructing their own particular romantic vision of Asia as the "Other" to the West.

HISTORICAL ENCOUNTERS

Placing black Buddhists within American religious history in general, and American Buddhist history specifically, requires that we reconsider the historical paradigms with which scholars have understood the transmission of Buddhism to the United States. Buddhist history in the United States has been told along the lines of two parallel trajectories: one that looks at the settlement of Asian immigrant communities, primarily on the coasts, from the eighteenth century onward, and the other that engages with white American Buddhist converts. The latter trajectory begins the history of convert Buddhism in the United States in the 1830s and 1840s, with the creation of the Transcendentalist Club in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1836 and the translation of the *Lotus Sutra* from French into English by Elizabeth Peabody in 1844. White American interest in Buddhism increased with the founding of the Theosophical Society in 1875 in New York City, the publication of Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* in 1879 in Boston, and the World Parliament of Religions in 1893. Interest in Buddhism and other Asian religions is generally thought to have declined in the 1910s through 1940s, with a spike in engagement with Buddhism occurring in the 1950s with the arrival of D. T. Suzuki in the United States and the rise of Beat Buddhism. Interest in Buddhism increased with the arrival of diverse Asian immigrant communities after the passing of the 1965 Immigration Act, although scholars have generally understood Asian American and white convert Buddhist communities to operate independently of each other.

These parallel histories have fed into theories that divide American Buddhism into “Two Buddhisms,” contributing to the racialization of American Buddhists. The Two Buddhisms theory emphasized whiteness as the baseline for defining “American” in relation to Asian “Others.” This categorization system has been criticized by numerous scholars for various reasons, including its elision of the presence of Buddhists who do not fit the categories of “white” and “Asian,” among others (Fields 1998; Cheah 2011; Hickey 2015; McNicholl 2018; Smith 2003; Selzer 2011). Despite critiques, the Two Buddhisms theory has remained influential in the structure of the field of American Buddhist studies. One alternative categorization model was proposed by Jan Nattier, who suggested a three-part system: elite/import Buddhism, comprised mainly of middle-class Euro-Americans; evangelical/export Buddhism, which has more non-Asian Buddhists of color; and ethnic/baggage Buddhism, comprising immigrant Asian Buddhist communities (Nattier 1995). Nattier proposed that evangelical/export Buddhist groups, like Soka Gakkai International (SGI), have a more diverse membership because these groups focus their missionary activities toward people of low socioeconomic status.

Nattier was successful in momentarily drawing Buddhist Studies scholars’ attention to black Buddhists, but the emphasis on the role of evangelical Buddhist groups, combined with the prominence of famous black Nichiren Buddhists like Tina Turner, has obscured the broader history of black Buddhists in the United States. When I mention my interest in the history of black Buddhism in the United States, most scholars assume that the history of black American Buddhism is entirely encompassed by SGI-USA, which was founded in 1975. While African Americans are estimated to constitute approximately 30% of SGI-USA, and while there was a decided increase in African American engagement with and conversion to Buddhism following the 1970s, the history of African American engagement with Buddhism is not fully encompassed by SGI-USA. Not only is there a vibrant black Buddhist movement outside of SGI-USA, but we can also trace black American interest in and knowledge of Buddhism to at least the 1910s, beginning with the period of the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance.²

The period between 1910 and 1940 was significant in the development of black American religio-racial consciousness and identity. Concurrent with American engagement with the Pacific community, these decades witnessed the rise of black international consciousness and an increased engagement on

²It is likely that further research on African American spiritualism and engagement with various metaphysical traditions, like that conducted by Emily Clark in *A Luminous Brotherhood* (2016), will enable us to push this timeline back farther.

the part of the African American community with Asia. Various Afro-Asian solidarity movements that emerged at this time reimagined cartographic connections between African Americans, Africa, and Asia through religion, culture, and race (Doku 2015; Onishi 2013; Prashad 2001; Taketani 2014). At the same time Harlem Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes and W. E. B. Du Bois travelled to Asia and documented their experiences, many in the African American community looked to the Japanese Empire as an integral player in the fulfillment of a manifest destiny to abolish Western imperialism and white supremacy (Taketani 2014). While visions of an allied black and Japanese empire influenced interpretations of World War II as a global race war (Horne 2008; Taketani 2014), these visions of Afro-Asian solidarity were not monolithic. Some African Americans were critical of the Japanese empire, especially after Japan's 1937 invasion of Nanjing. These thinkers looked to China rather than Japan, forging a connection between China's national struggle, black resistance in the United States, and the global fight against imperialism (Frazier 2015). During the early and mid-twentieth century, members of the African American community also nurtured dialogues with India, where both sides found solidarity in their shared experience of oppression under a white colonial nation-state (Horne 2008). Afrocentric and Dalitcentric scholars forged a discourse of Afro-Dalit solidarity against white supremacy, some even going so far as to claim that Africans and Dalits had a shared biological history, "that Dalits indeed are Africans who emigrated to India in ancient times" (Prashad 2001, 50). Civil rights figures of the 1950s and 1960s, like Martin Luther King Jr., engaged with Asian religious figures and philosophy.³ While the black church and black liberation theology played a crucial role in the civil rights movements of the 50s and 60s, many black Americans who later converted to Buddhism, like angel Kyodo Williams, came of age during the civil rights and black power movements, and this geopolitical context is apparent in their writing.

The rise of various Afro-Asian solidarity movements and the migration of African American communities to north urban centers in the early twentieth century coincided with the rise of Garveyism and new

³ Although King was not Buddhist, he was friends with Thich Nat Han, who urged King to denounce the Vietnam War. King also learned about Buddhism while attending the Crozer Theological Seminary. In an essay submitted April 28, 1950 for George W. Davis's "History of Living Religions" class, titled "The Chief Characteristics and Doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism," King demonstrates familiarity with the writings of D. T. Suzuki, Ananda Coomaraswamy, J. B. Pratt, and Sarvepalli Radakrishnah (Carson, Luker, and Russell 1992, 313–26). King mentions Buddhism in a number of other essays written for Davis in 1950 and 1951 (Carson, Luker, and Russell 1992, 407–15, 384–89, 280–88; Carson, Luker, and Russell 2007, 107) and in a 1953 sermon (Carson, Luker, and Russell 2007, 146–49). King was well-versed in the philosophy of Mohandas K. Gandhi and with the problem of caste in India, applying what he learned from Gandhi to the United States, and seeking to "conjoin the destinies of Black America and India" (Horne 2008, 3).

religio-racial movements that turned away from the identifier “Negro Christian,” relocating the black community’s origins in Ethiopia (Ethiopian Hebrews), Morocco (the Moorish Science Temple), and Asia (Nation of Islam). Some communities, like the Peace Mission led by Father Divine, rejected racial identifiers altogether and adopted a vision of a common humanity (Weisenfeld 2016). Some religio-racial groups, like the Nation of Islam, influenced by the Ahmaddiya movement, were shaped by dialogues between South Asians and black Americans. Black theologians and political activists continued to critique white religion and colonialism, opting to seek political and religious solidarity with various groups in Asia while simultaneously resignifying the meaning of blackness and detaching it from histories of enslavement and oppression (Johnson 2015; Weisenfeld 2016). A blossoming black metaphysicalism, with roots in the nineteenth century, spread in the urban North and South during the 1920s and 1930s (Bowler 2013; see also Clark 2016). In the 1910s through 1940s, the combined events of economic uncertainty, black urbanization, and large-scale migration inspired an increasing number of African Americans to experiment with spiritualized Eastern (usually Islamic) personas (Harris 2011; Nance 2009). These new religious identities and theologies often “provided new ways of thinking about history, racial identity, ritual and community life, and collective future” (Weisenfeld 2016, 2). Although no doubt religiously motivated, for some African Americans adopting Oriental identities also provided alternative methods for coping with economic and racial disparity and occasionally allowed African Americans to circumvent Jim Crow laws and gain employment (Harris 2011; Nance 2009). This rich tradition of black metaphysicalism, coinciding with an increased geopolitical engagement with Asia, demonstrates the need to investigate the use of Asian religious themes in black American writing, art, and performance.⁴

The turn away from the religio-racial identifier of “Negro Christian,” the rise of new religio-racial histories that connected blackness with Asia, and the increasing popularity of black spiritualism and metaphysical traditions in the early twentieth century provided the fertile ground in which the seeds of black Buddhism would be planted. Evidence of essays, articles, and paintings that feature Buddhism or Buddhist themes demonstrate

⁴For example, African American theatres put on productions, like the all-black interpretation of the operetta *The Mikado*, titled *The Swing Mikado*, which prominently featured Asian themes (Taketani 2014), and African American productions frequently employed religious themes (Prentiss 2014). There is a lack of research, however, investigating the role of Asian religious themes in black art, performance, and writing.

an emerging engagement with Asian religions by African Americans.⁵ This increased interest in Asian religions corresponded with minor conversions to, or involvement with, Buddhism. It was during the Harlem Renaissance that an ethnologist used African Americans' reported adherence to Islam and Buddhism as evidence of their inherently religious nature, writing, "generally speaking my impression is that while negroes are a race inclined to be religious, they are not particular, however, as to the nature of the religion of their worship. You will find among them in Harlem also Mahometans and Buddhists. They go where they are led" (Godbey 1930, 26). Moorish Science Temple members carried identification cards that proclaimed that members honored Jesus, Muhammad, the Buddha ("Buddah"), and Confucius (Weisenfeld, 2016, 46).

The most well-known black Buddhist during these decades was Sufi Abdul Hamid (born Eugene Brown), an African American religious and labor rights leader known in contemporary newspapers as "Black Hitler." Famous for his characteristic wardrobe that included a purple turban, a gold-lined green velvet cloak, and riding boots, Hamid mixed aspects of Buddhism, Hinduism, and eventually Islam with his metaphysical and occult practices. While living in Chicago he promoted himself as an Oriental philosopher by the name of Bishop Conshankin. In 1932 he moved to Harlem, where he became interested in Islam and changed his name to Sufi Abdul Hamid. In April 1938 he founded the Buddhist Universal Holy Temple of Tranquility in Harlem, which he described as

⁵*The Crisis*, the magazine for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples, mentioned Buddhism in approximately 20 articles between 1911 and 1967. In Marita Bonner's 1925 essay, "On Being Young – a Woman – and Colored," which highlights the social constraints placed on black American women, she posits "perhaps Buddha is a woman" (Crawford 2007, 126). Bonner juxtaposes the wisdom and understanding of the Buddha ("brown like I am") with that of the Greeks and Romans. Connecting herself with the Buddha by the shared color of their skin and their quiet patience, Bonner remarks that the Buddha attained enlightenment "a thousand years before the white man knew there was so very much difference between feet and hands" (Bonner 2004, 1247). Here the Buddha acts as a bridge figure that verifies the historical priority of non-white wisdom. In addition to references to Buddhism in literature, the Buddha and Buddhist figures also appeared in African American art. The cover of the March 1924 issue of *Crisis* featured an image by Harlem Renaissance artist Gwendolyn Bennett, titled "The Pipes of Pan." The image included a black monastic-like figure meditating under a tree, while Pan and other mythological creatures play music around him (Bennett 1924). Between 1925 and 1927, Lois Mailou Jones, an African American artist, created three images featuring Buddhist figures while in art school in Boston: *Bodhisattva with Urn*, *Japanese Garden*, and *buddha*—a painting, which, contrary to its name, features the bodhisattva Guanyin seated on a Persian rug in front of Chinese wallpaper (Hanzel 2009). Jones also completed three paintings of Chinese and Japanese textiles between 1924 and 1925, one of which, titled *Chinese Birdhouses* (1927), is the same textile design as that in the background of *buddha*. This evidence suggests that African American artists and writers during the Harlem Renaissance were aware of and producers of knowledge about Buddhism. All these examples are the result of a cursory scan through a few online archives—more sustained research will doubtlessly find more materials, not just mentioning Buddhism, but also Hinduism and other Asian religions.

“a Buddhist temple based on the teachings of all the sages and prophets of the ages” (Cooke 1938). Hamid claimed to have “knowledge similar to that practiced by the yogis of India, Tibet and Japan,” and that he was motivated “to confirm [his] ability as a master of the same philosophy as practiced by those of the European world” (Cooke 1938). The temple’s curriculum was to include classes on the Buddhist path to *nirvāṇa* and on yoga. Hamid died three months after opening the Temple and his funeral included both Muslim and Buddhist ceremonies (Matthews 1938). His wife, Madame Fu Futtam (born Dorothy Matthews), a spiritualist in her own right, took over the temple after Hamid’s death and ran it under the direction of her husband’s spirit, with whom she communicated from the second-floor meditation room in the Temple. Hamid’s Buddhist identity was so well-known that, three years after his death, he became implicated in a World War II conspiracy theory. This theory proposed that Hamid was to be the leader of the “BB Plan,” supposedly concocted by the Japanese who planned to take over the world with Buddhism, with the help of black Buddhists (“BB”) in the United States (Richardson 1942). Hamid’s Buddhist identity allowed him to engage in re-articulations of black identity while simultaneously implicating him in relations of empire on a transnational scale.

It is clear, then, that understanding the dynamic engagement of religio-racial discourses by both Buddhist practitioners and scholars requires more nuanced understandings of racial dynamics than the current focus on Orientalism as an engagement between a white West and Asian East allows. Orientalist discourse does not occur within a monolithic white West; rather, white Orientalist visions of Asia were crafted alongside and in engagement with other racialization discourses. Orientalist discourses alone do not adequately account for the racialization of non-Asian Buddhists of color in the United States, nor do they explain how black Buddhists construct identities in relation to Asia and the American racial state. As even a brief history of African American engagement with Asia reveals, African Americans and black Buddhists have been, and continue to be, active participants in, consumers of, and critics of Orientalist discourse and constructions of Asia and the West. Therefore, we should recast our investigations away from relations between a “white West as empire” and “colonized Others,” and consider black Buddhists as part of a number of transnational and regional networks between African Americans, Asian Americans, white Americans, and Asians (to name a few).

As recent work in transpacific racial relations has demonstrated, black counter-culturalism in the United States and the evolution of black radicalism and internationalism were bound up with countercultural imaginations of Pacific communities, including Afro-Asian alliances (Onishi

2013; Taketani 2014). These dialogues were often created in purposeful contradistinction to Western imperialistic discourses and geopolitical ambitions. While the historical background of early twentieth-century Buddhism is rarely, if ever, explicitly discussed by contemporary black Buddhists, contemporary black Buddhists have inherited these two historical backgrounds—the first stemming from Orientalist constructions of Buddhism, and the second from African American metaphysicalists and activists who participated in countercultural imaginations of Pacific communities. The convergence of these two histories is apparent in black Buddhist articulations of a narrative of the Buddha as a fellow person of color who was awakened to the realities of racial oppression. As a result, although African American discourse about Asia and Asian religions often positions itself in opposition to western hegemonic discourse, it does not succeed in removing itself from imperial Orientalist discourse—and as we will see, contemporary black Buddhist discourse is no different.

BLACK BUDDHIST WRITINGS

In the last decades of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century, black Buddhists who came of age during the Civil Rights period became more visible in publishing and teaching. We now possess a veritable treasure trove of black Buddhist writing in the form of life-writings, interviews, blogs, magazine articles, and social media outreach focusing on promoting dialogue and raising awareness of the operation of racism within Buddhist communities (McNicholl 2018; Selzer 2011; Smith, Munt, and Yip 2016). In this part of the article, I focus on writings in which black Buddhists intertwine Buddhist teachings and themes with reference to the context of their own life. These writings may not be strictly autobiographical, and may take the form of short chapters, interviews, newspaper articles, and monographs. Many of these are written, at least in part, for an audience of black Americans or other people of color. Due to their focus on both autobiography and Buddhist teachings, these works are ideal for providing insight into how black Buddhists situate themselves as racialized subjects within a Buddhist worldview.

Although the individual works vary significantly, it is possible to identify a number of common themes within the genre of black Buddhist life-writings, which share similarities with the genre of self-help dharma books and simultaneously challenges it by including a more autobiographical focus, an attempt to reach out to the black community, and a critique of white supremacy in Buddhist communities. A typical example of the genre of black Buddhist writings is the 2000 book *Being Black*, written by angel Kyodo williams, whose quotation opened this article. This

excerpt comes from the introduction to the sixth chapter of her book, which describes the Eightfold Path. williams opens the chapter with a quotation from Martin Luther King Jr.: “Salvation is being on the right road, not having reached a destination” (williams 2000, 103).⁶ williams creates a juxtaposition between the life and teachings of King and those of the Buddha by drawing a parallel between King’s own characterization of the right “road” to salvation with the Buddhist Eightfold “path.” She further reinforces this connection in her description of the Buddha’s life that serves as the introduction to the Eightfold Path, in which she highlights his commitment to racial equality and to action:

In the Buddha’s time, people believed that you were either born with the ability to achieve a greater understanding of life, or you weren’t. But the Buddha said no—you don’t have to be born into a special class or race. You don’t have to come with special qualities. You don’t have to wait for another life. Everyone has what it takes and it’s within all of our grasps. We can reduce our sense of discomfort and feel at ease. We can master the art of life. Everything you need to have a better life, you have right now. The answer to having a better life is not about getting a better life, it’s just about changing how we see the one we have right now. Having been a warrior before becoming enlightened, the Buddha was all about action. So rather than relying solely on faith, he said that we can take specific steps to encourage a change in perspective. Not only that, the Buddha had the radical belief that becoming awake to one’s life was possible for anyone. (williams 2000, 103)

williams’s book relies on the use of the general “you” and “we,” but the audience she addresses is simultaneously more encompassing and more specific than assumed in other American dharma books. The combination of the quotation by Martin Luther King Jr. and the claim that the Buddha said his awakening was open to people of any race and class purposely includes any person who might pick up her book. However, williams’s use of “we” also purposely rejects the implicit monolithic white, straight audience that one finds in other dharma books. This is a purposeful maneuver, as williams, like other black Buddhists, seeks to challenge understandings of the white heterosexual man as the normative Buddhist subject.⁷

⁶This quotation comes from the sermon “Unfulfilled Dreams,” given at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, GA, on March 3, 1968.

⁷Although race is a dominant theme in these works, it is important to remember that gender and sexuality are always implicated in discussions of race. All of the black Buddhists cited in this article address issues of gender and sexuality in their writings, with many arguing that gender and sexuality are part of the embodied experience of one’s own self, and in need of as much deconstruction as one’s racial identity.

The language williams employs, combined with strategically placed imagery (diagrams of black men and women, with natural curly hair, meditating), conjures an image of a sangha of black political seekers. She tells her community to be “open to white folks, Asians, Latinos, and East Indians,” implying that her audience is primarily understood to be black (williams 2000, 146). She frequently addresses the black community directly: “Fear has been and still is one of the great plagues of people of color. For a variety of reasons, we exist in a state of constant fear. The history of black people as a group in this country places us in one of the most unusual of circumstances” (williams 2000, 146). She also opens up her imagined sangha to all people of color from any social class, instructing her readers to accept themselves as they are, “whatever that may be: funky attitude, arrogant, self-pitying, too fat, kinky-haired, pimples, freckled, too tall, too short, not enough money, always late, high-strung, unmotivated, skinny as a rail, high yellow, chinky-eyed, Kunta Kinte-looking, half-breed, flat-nosed, dim-witted, still living with your momma, working at McDonald’s, conceited, know you better than anyone else, Cuchifrita, Coconut, Spic, Negro” (williams 2000, 151). williams names not only self-deprecating descriptions of one’s body, but also lists derogatory names, thereby reclaiming language forced upon minorities as part of the process of Buddhist awakening. Although the emphasis on loving your natural body is part of a common contemporary feminist and political discourse, when used by williams it acquires additional meaning, as she is one of a number of black Buddhists who emphasize the importance of embodiment for attaining awakening (McNicholl 2018).

A common feature of American dharma books is a claim that one does not need to be highly educated to attain insight into Buddhist teachings. Although most American Buddhist converts are well-educated, these claims create a discourse that elevates experience over education and intellectualism. In the writings of black Buddhists and other people of color, such claims not only open up Buddhist teachings to people who cannot afford expensive retreats, but this discourse also allows Buddhists like williams to circumvent white male lineages by invoking the wisdom of the ancestors of people of color: “Some wise people are illiterate in the sense that they cannot read letters and words written on a page. They are still wise. We recognize that in them. Old women on the porches of the South that have never set foot in a classroom, African and Native American tribal elders, toothless sages in the foothills of India—they possess a wisdom beyond measure. They seem to be full of ‘just knowing’” (williams 2000, 107). By emphasising the parallels between the wisdom of African and Native American elders and the sages of India, williams is

able to create a connection and lineage to the Buddha and other Buddhist teachers based on experiential wisdom.

Any number of the small sample of techniques illustrated above (and shown throughout this article) may be combined in black American Buddhist literature to purposely subvert the primacy of white Buddhists and to visualize a sangha of people of color who are aligned together in a global, timeless fight against white supremacy. One aspect of this discourse, which we turn to next, is a unique approach to the life of the Buddha. Many black Buddhists place the Buddha within a framework that echoes Jim Crow era segregation and the Civil Rights movement. This allows black Buddhists to reconcile the wisdom, goals, and actions of African Americans in the United States within a Buddhist worldview, and to legitimate their own wisdom as authentically Buddhist. Various aspects of the Buddha's life, including his social background, the battle with Māra just prior to awakening, and the nature of the Buddha's knowledge, are reconciled in such a way as to allow black Buddhists to juxtapose the wisdom of the Buddha against a transnational and timeless fight against white supremacy.

Jim Crow in India

Black Buddhist writings portray the Buddha's life and teachings in a manner that is consonant with the goals, teachings, and figures of the Civil Rights movement. To situate the Buddha as a civil rights figure requires one to, firstly, participate in a creative reconstructive historiographical project, which emphasizes that racial stratification, if not black people, were present in ancient India, and in early Buddhism, from the very beginning. Black bisexual Zen Buddhist teacher Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, in answering her sister's question of "what does Buddhism have to do with black people?" describes a history of black people in India:

there is no Dharma gate marked for black people only. But we can acknowledge that there must be some history between the people of the African Diaspora and the teachings of Buddha. . . . There is awareness on my part that the Buddha's teachings impacted the lives of those who suffered oppression such as the black Tamil Indians, Dalits, and the Untouchables—held down by a caste system. Additionally, Nagarjuna, the great scholar of the Mahayana teachings, espoused the freedom of enlightenment to the black Indians of southern ancient India. And because Buddhism spoke of liberation I assume that it did not flourish in a country that through tradition held the caste system in place. . . . While ancient India is where Africans might have connected with the Buddha, it is speculative due to suppressed or lost history, considering Africans as

part of the Buddhist movement from its beginning is a crucial and valid historical perspective to unearth. (Manuel 2015)

Where other black Buddhist authors might simply draw parallels to the caste system and racial stratification, Manuel points to the possibility of pursuing an alternative historical perspective, which probes into a shared religious and racial history between Africans and Indians—in a similar manner as the “religio-racial groups” of the 1910s to 1940s investigated by Judith Weisenfeld (2016). Manuel is not unique in looking for this shared religio-racial history; black Buddhists like Anthony “Amp” Elmore, leader of the Proud Black Buddhist World Association, uploads frequent online sermons on YouTube in which he claims the original Buddhists were black. Scholars like Gary Okihiro have also promoted historical recovery projects, uncovering a history of interaction between Africans and Asians that can be traced back long before European colonization (Okihiro 2014).

In the above quotation, Manuel gestures to another historical connection: that between the modern conversion of Dalits to Buddhism under B. R. Ambedkar, the caste system, and the racial oppression of African Americans. These connections are made more explicit in the writings of Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*. In a chapter submission to a collection of autobiographies by Buddhists of color, she compares the caste system to racial oppression in the United States:

Buddha, presumably raised as a Hindu, was no doubt disheartened by its racism, i.e., the caste system that today blights the lives of 160 million Indians. Indians who were once called ‘Untouchables’ and now call themselves ‘Dalits’ or ‘Those broken to pieces.’ They are not allowed to own land. They cannot enter the same doors, attend the schools, or drink from the same wells, as the so-called higher castes. Their shadow must never fall on those above them. They are brutalized and the women raped at will. *Niggers* of India, they are. Traditionally it is taught that the Buddha discovered someone old, someone sick and someone dying, after having lived a very sheltered life, and that because of this suffering, inherent to all mankind, he struck out into the world to find a remedy. There’s no mention, usually, of the horrible caste system, everywhere in place in his area, which I personally find impossible to imagine the Buddha ignoring. I like to think of the young prince, Siddhartha, observing this hypocrisy of his native religion, perhaps touching or loving an ‘untouchable,’ and deciding there had to be a better way. (Walker 2004, 194–95)

Walker is aware of various versions of the Buddha’s biography, and purposely deemphasizes some parts (the Buddha seeing the four sights,

an old person, a sick person, a dying person, and a renunciant) in favor of emphasizing another, less mentioned context of his life—the caste system of ancient India. By comparing Dalits to “niggers,” Walker makes a clear parallel between the caste system in ancient and modern India and the historical oppression of African Americans in the United States.

Walker’s words bear a striking resemblance to those of Harry Paxton Howard in a 1942 article titled “The ‘Negroes’ of India,” published in *The Crisis*. Howard begins:

They lived in a swamp outside the village, in wretched squalor. There were drier sites, but they were used for farmland—or were on the wrong side of the Aryan village. For there was only one side on which these black people could live—the side towards which the wind blew. The wind from their vile ghetto must not ‘pollute’ the air of the Aryan people. So it had been from time immemorial. (Howard 1942, 377)

This article goes on for a page in a similar manner, painting a picture that is deliberately similar to the situation in the United States, frequently pointing to the contrast between “Aryans” and “niggers” to discuss the relationship between high caste Indians and untouchables. After describing this desperate situation, Howard praises B. R. Ambedkar, the social reformer who inspired the Dalit Buddhist Movement and campaigned against the discrimination of Dalits. Howard compares the caste system of ancient India to the Aryan racial science of Nazi Germany and to the American racial state. He suggests that:

many of our own southern Aryans would agree with the old Brahman text that a woman of the black race was meant only for enjoyment, and not for the furtherance of any ‘higher’ purpose such as a marriage. And the Brahman punishment for a black man having intercourse with an Aryan woman—having his sexual organs cut off, and burning alive—is also not unknown in Dixie, though happily never codified into law. (Howard 1942, 392)

Buddhism is not mentioned in this article, except to note its role in the development of the system of karma, which Howard believes supported the caste system.

We see in Walker’s and Manuel’s words echoes of the Afro-Dalit solidarity movements of the early twentieth century. Afro-Dalit solidarity continues to the present day, with black Buddhists like Venerable Pannavati, who claims ordination in Theravada and Chan traditions and engages in Vajrayana practices. According to her website, Pannavati “has adopted many ‘untouchable’

villages in India, helping them establish an egalitarian community based on Buddhist principles of conduct and livelihood” (Pannavati 2017). Walker and Manuel participate in a discourse that has deep roots in African American dialogues with India—dialogues that aligned African Americans, Indians, and Indian Dalits against white supremacy and racism.

Black Baptist Buddhist Jan Willis also connects the ancient Indian caste system to the modern situation of racial oppression in the United States. She writes:

When the details of the Buddha’s life were reviewed, he became even more of an inspiration. For he was a man who, in actual practice, rejected the systemic oppression of his country’s people by denouncing the caste, or varna, system of the Aryans (which had originally been founded on color discrimination) and by allowing women to enter into his community of practitioners. Both actions were extremely radical, even revolutionary, for his time. He was a man who left his youthful life of luxury to commune with diverse people of whatever caste or gender so long as they, too, sought a disciplined path to liberation. Because of the Buddha’s teachings and his own life example, many African-American children of the civil rights movement have been finding their way to Buddhism. Yet—as has so often been the case before—we are doing this without much fanfare or even recognition, once again being made—almost!—invisible. (Willis 2011)

Willis emphasizes another theme hinted at in Walker’s and Manuel’s writings—the reading of the Buddha as a social reformer against a racially stratified society. Such readings and depictions of the Buddha are not dissimilar to nineteenth-century characterizations of the Buddha and early Buddhism by white colonial scholars. Colonial scholars tended to portray the Buddha as a rational white philosopher who rejected the ritualistic excesses of a caste society that privileged a corrupt priestly elite—a vision with deliberate parallels to the Protestant Reformation (Almond 1988; Masuzawa 2005; Tweed 2000). In fact, we should note that Willis and Walker’s reading of the caste system as a racially discriminatory system instituted by Aryans has roots in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial racial science. This system became partially mapped onto the Buddha’s body, which was subject to much speculation during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by colonial scholars who proposed various theories about the Buddha’s race (Almond 1988).

By the 1850s, around the time that concepts of religion, race, language, and nation were crystalizing and being distinguished from each other, scholars determined Buddhism originated in India. The Buddha’s Indian origins allowed scholars to proclaim the Buddha as an Aryan, a term that, while originally a linguistic designation, by the nineteenth century came

to designate an ancient master race. The Buddha's supposed *kṣatriya* (warrior) caste identity likely led to easy association between the race of the Buddha with the Aryan invasion/migration theories. These theories postulated that Indian civilization emerged through "a clash between invading, fair-skinned, civilized Sanskrit-speaking Aryans and dark-skinned, barbarous aborigines," a "local application of the double binary that guided all nineteenth-century European ethnologies, the double binary of the fair and the dark, the civilized and the savage" (Trautmann 1997, 194). Some scholars, like James Fergusson, wedded religious sensibilities to racial purity to argue that the Buddha, because he was a descendent of "the Solar kings of Ayodhya" was "undoubtedly of purely Aryan race," and that "Buddhism was little more than a revival of the coarser superstitions of the aboriginal races, purified and refined by the application of Aryan morality, and elevated by doctrines borrowed from the intellectual superiority of the Aryan races" (Fergusson 1868, 62). The Aryan migration theory became linked with the emergence of the caste system. Caste became conflated with race based on the word *varṇa*, which is the term for the four main castes of India: *brāhmaṇa* (priest), *kṣatriya* (warrior), *vaiśya* (farmer/merchant), and *śūdra* (laborer), but literally means "color" (Trautmann 1997). Fergusson himself believed that "the dissemination of the Buddhist religion is wholly due to the accident of its having been adopted by the low caste kings of Magadha" (Fergusson 1868, 62).

Although black Buddhists share with early Orientalist Buddhologists a reading of early Buddhism as a reformation movement against a caste-oriented society, as well as a tendency to conflate caste with race, the hero of their narrative—the Buddha—drastically, and I would argue purposefully, departs from previous depictions of the Buddha as a white Aryan. For nineteenth-century Euro-American Protestants, portraying the Buddha as an Aryan reformer allowed them to claim the Buddha as a Protestant reformer. For black Buddhists, however, emphasizing the Buddha as a person of color aligns black Buddhists with the Buddha in a larger mission of protesting a racially stratified society. Black Buddhist discourse, as it concerns the caste system, partly draws on white colonial discourse while simultaneously maintaining strong ties to a separate trajectory of African American counter-discourse concerning Asia.

"Awakening Warriors"

If the Buddha's historical context can be read as similar to Jim Crow era United States, then the Buddha and other prominent Buddhist figures can be seen as the enlightened equivalents of civil rights activists. Black Buddhist authors frequently portray civil rights activists as compassionate

bodhisattvas (beings who have aspired to become a buddha in a future life) or as dharma teachers. We have seen one example of this already, in the excerpt from williams's *Being Black*, in which she draws parallels between Martin Luther King Jr.'s "road" with the Buddhist Eightfold Path, and between King's civil rights activism and the Buddha's awakening to the operation of racism. Although williams is instrumental in the promotion of a vision of civil rights leaders as ideal Buddhists, she is not the only black Buddhist to do this.

Martin Luther King Jr. is the most common civil rights figure hailed as a bodhisattva. In a 2006 blog post, Manuel writes, "I might say that Martin Luther King Jr. was my first Dharma teacher. His message of non-violence and peace sank deep into my eleven-year old heart, especially at a time when four little girls my age had been bombed to death" (Manuel 2006).⁸ Gina Sharpe, the co-founder of the New York Insight Meditation Center, wrote in a blog post commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. Day that "like the Buddha, he taught that the resolution of conflict, rather than the absence of conflict, is the fertile ground on which to build such a community—'our loyalties must transcend our race, tribe, class, and nation'—and that only a change in attitude created by love can create a just and respectful society" (Sharpe 2015). Charles Johnson has written that "King embraced as a Christian much of what a Buddhist would see as the bodhisattva vow; he traveled to India in 1959, a guest of the Gandhi Peace Foundation, and returned to America determined to devote one day a week of his ever strangulation-tight schedule to fasting and meditation" (Johnson 2017). By connecting King to the teachings of Buddhism and by portraying him as an ideal Buddhist figure, Manuel, Sharpe, and Johnson reconcile a key figure in the black community with Buddhism. This allows black Buddhists to look to both civil rights figures and to Buddhist texts as equally authoritative sources of wisdom.

williams, in *Being Black*, uses the term "warrior" to connect the Buddha's warrior (*kṣātriya*) caste with his status as a bodhisattva (prior to his enlightenment), which she calls an "awakening warrior." williams writes that "warriors had the responsibility of protecting the people," and that awakening warriors "live in a way that is of benefit to all" (williams 2000, 65). She lists a number of awakening warriors, including Sojourner Truth, Muhammad Ali, Pierre Toussaint, Mohandas K. Gandhi, and El-Hajj Malik El Shabazz, or Malcolm X, who "sacrificed what we consider elements of their personal freedom in the course of remaining true

⁸Manuel is referring to the Ku Klux Klan's bombing of the African American 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. The explosion killed four girls between the ages of 11 and 14. This quotation also appears in her 2011 book, *Tell Me Something About Buddhism* (Manuel 2011, 26).

to their commitments of waking up the world” (williams 2000, 83–84). williams believes the bodhisattva ideal has particular relevance for black people:

I was captivated by the bodhisattva ideal. . . . In bodhisattvas, I saw Sojourner and Ella, Ambedkar and Malcolm. In their infinite wisdom and boundless compassion, they responded to the cries. Even though liberation is available to them, they hold it off until every person can be awakened, too. . . . I saw this as a more sustainable path, especially for Black people, whose road to victory in the external landscape would likely be a long one given the deep entrenchment of the forces of oppression set against us. (williams, Owens, Syedullah 2016, 91)

williams uses the bodhisattva-as-awakening-warrior as a bridge figure between the contemporary fight against white supremacy and Buddhism. The bodhisattva is particularly suitable for her cause, because the career trajectory of a bodhisattva is often framed as unfathomably long. Bodhisattvas, rather than becoming enlightened in this life, aspire to become a buddha in a future life out of compassion and a desire to help other beings. williams views the trajectory of the fight against white supremacy in similarly long terms. This contemporary fight is viewed as both local/national, as indicated by references to African American civil rights leaders, as well as transnational, as illustrated by the connections to Mahatma Gandhi and to B. R. Ambedkar, the inspiration for the twentieth-century Dalit Buddhist movement.

In the book *Radical Dharma* (2016), coauthored by williams, Lama Rod Owens, and Jasmine Syedullah and following a national tour bearing the same name, the notion of the bodhisattva as “spiritual warrior” is employed to tie together civil rights activists with Buddhist ideals. Various civil rights activists are associated with bodhisattvas as “spiritual warriors,” and as “wisdom prophets who lay bare the unarmed truth of the transgenerational cultural illness of white superiority in equal measure with an unapologetic love that holds those besieged by that plague in the light of their humanity” (williams, Owens, Syedullah 2016, 194). The concept of the spiritual warrior, or awakening warrior, as civil rights figure allows black Buddhists to connect Buddhist teachings with a transgenerational and transnational resistance against white supremacy, both within Buddhist communities and without.

The Battle with Māra

If civil rights figures are bodhisattvas, beings who are acutely attuned to and dedicated to fulfilling the awakening achieved by the Buddha, then

the Buddha must be the model civil rights leader. Portraits of the Buddha as a civil rights figure rely on conceptions of him as a social reformer—a characteristic that, as seen above, is a feature of Orientalist colonial discourse and depictions of the Buddha. In both visions, the Buddha is an enlightened social reformer against a priestly religion that sanctions the caste system, but black Buddhists additionally emphasize the role of racial stratification and the Buddha's promotion of racial equality.

In a 2012 interview with Gina Sharpe about her experience leading meditation retreats for people of color, Sharpe described the Buddha as a social reformer:

The Buddha was a person of color. Allegedly he came from a princely cast [*sic*]; and he was a social radical. He brought people of all castes together in a time when society had very strict rules against mixing; he had women in his community, which for that particular time in that culture was a radical idea. He did not adhere to the rigid class structure or ideas about who could do what, even though he clearly respected the rules. Similarly, the issues we address in our modern time are relevant to all people and go beyond the conventional ways in our culture of working with difference. (Tricycle 2012)

Sharpe, like many Buddhists of color, affirms that the Buddha was not white and that he challenged authoritative structures, thereby providing a model for present day Buddhists of color. Her description of the Buddha's teaching methods—that he worked from an understanding of the differences of a multi-class and multi-caste community consisting of both men and women—is upheld as a justification for the rise of meditation retreats just for people of color. Sharpe uses the Buddha's status as a social reformer to bridge the past with the present, where she believes "Buddhism in the West has taken on the cultural trappings of the West, including racism" (Cochran 2004). The Buddha, framed as a social radical reforming a rigid, patriarchal, conservative society, acts as a model for the black Buddhist teachers and leaders of retreats and centers for people of color, who challenge the white heteronormativity of twenty-first century American Buddhist centers.

Crucial to the image of the Buddha as a social reformer awakened to the problem of race is the story of the Buddha's enlightenment. According to various stories, the Buddha, having prepared to attain enlightenment, sits down at the foot of a tree and begins to concentrate and enter the *jhānas*, states of meditative absorption that correspond to the Buddhist heavens. Māra, a malevolent deity who represents *saṃsāra*, the wheel of rebirth, attempts to prevent the Buddha from reaching enlightenment by sending his beautiful daughters to distract the Buddha. When this fails, he unleashes his demon army. According to the story, the Buddha,

unaffected, calls the earth to witness the meritorious deeds of his past lives, and his worthiness to attain the enlightenment of a buddha, and touches the earth with one hand. Māra is subsequently defeated and the Buddha attains enlightenment. Some black Buddhists draw on this scene, placing themselves in the position of the Buddha and portraying Māra and his demon host as representative of the white supremacist racial state.

williams purposely draws on the story of the Buddha's enlightenment and his battle with Māra as a way of connecting black Buddhists to Buddhist history. In an essay for the Buddhist magazine *Lion's Roar*, williams writes that when she established the New Dharma Meditation Center for Urban Peace in California, she "took up the story of the historic Buddha touching the earth," "facing down the darkness of Mara," as their "symbolic transmission" (williams 2013). She explains:

Mara challenged Gautama's right to ascend the seat of enlightenment, just as the dominant white paradigm showers arrows of comparison that challenge the culture, beliefs, and ways of other people, viewing them as inferior to our own. While many people wish to paint over the blight of racism that permeates the Buddhist community by casting it under the rug of a misguided fixation on identity, it was the Buddha himself who expressed an awareness of the need to express race, caste, gender, and class oppression by modeling the path to liberation. In reaching down and touching the earth, the Buddha of that time, and all of the buddhas who follow his radical example, are witnessed by the earth itself and join a sacred, timeless, and unshakeable lineage of liberation—one that is evidenced both inside and out. The earth shudders in approval. (williams 2013)

williams writes that she chose this model because it affirms the belonging of black Buddhists to a lineage of awakening that goes beyond the awakening of the Buddha, and especially beyond that of white Buddhist teachers (williams 2013). As we have seen, it is not unusual for black Buddhists to look to their ancestors and to previous people of color who have lived through oppression for inspiration in their practice. Such figures are frequently referenced alongside bodhisattvas and to civil rights leaders who are considered bodhisattvas. When williams visualizes Māra's attack on the Buddha, it is in explicit reference to racial discrimination within Buddhist communities that implicitly challenges black Buddhists' right to their own seats. In this episode, williams is able to move from the local context (white Buddhist communities that marginalize people of color), to the national context (the racial state), and finally to the transnational fight against racism, based on the comparison between black Buddhists and the ancient Indian context. That these connections can be drawn is a facet of the perception of the truth the Buddha awakened to as

being, in williams's words, sacred and timeless, and witnessed across the entire earth. williams draws on assumptions that Eastern spirituality and wisdom are timeless in order to align herself with the spiritual wisdom of the Buddha and other people of color.

Alice Walker similarly uses the scene of Māra's onslaught against the Buddha to situate her own actions in the civil rights movement and to understand her own embodiment as a racialized subject:

In the face of unbearable suffering following the assassinations and betrayals of the Civil Rights movement, I too sat down upon the Earth and asked its permission to posit a different way from that in which I was raised. Just as the Buddha did, when Mara, the king of delusion, asked what gave him the right to think he could direct humankind away from the suffering they had always endured. *When Mara queried him, the Buddha touched the earth.* This is the single most important act, to my mind, of the Buddha. Because it acknowledges where he came from. It is a humble recognition of his true heritage, his true lineage. Though Buddhist monks would spend millennia pretending all wisdom evolves from the masculine and would consequently treat Buddhist nuns abominably, Buddha clearly placed himself in the lap of the Earth Mother, and affirmed Her wisdom and Her support. (Walker 2004, 194–95)

Just as the Buddha acted against the suffering of the world, so too Walker sat upon the earth, positing a new way forward from the suffering caused by racism. Walker shows similar deftness in moving from local, national, and transnational contexts, additionally emphasising a timeless lineage of female wisdom in Buddhism that stretches from the Earth goddess, to nuns, to the bodies of female black Buddhists. Walker and williams participate in a discourse of counter-hegemonic romanticization, subverting ideas that true Buddhism lies in white male American centers and positioning the Buddha and Buddhist teachings against the white supremacy of the West.

Black Buddhists are not the only Buddhists of color to identify the Buddha as a civil rights figure, which is not surprising given the hybrid nature of networks within American Buddhist communities. Buddhists draw on similar themes to challenge dominant narratives in American Buddhist communities, and in doing so, solidify connections between American Buddhists of color and ancient India. Larry Yang, for example, when distracted from his meditation practice by racism and discrimination, situates himself in the place of the Buddha:

Most of all I realized that when I, as a person of color, experience the pain of difference, I often am diverted from my deepest intentions . . . intentions of staying in my Dharma seat and staying engaged with my

meditation practice. . . . There is a life event of the Buddha that has provided me guidance with these kinds of challenges. The story comes from the process of the Buddha's own enlightenment. . . . After nine of these unsuccessful attempts to unseat the future Buddha from his path towards liberation, an enraged Mara gathered the hundreds of thousands in his army. With the roar of their screams in the background, Mara declared to the Buddha-to-be: "Get out of that seat! That seat belongs to me and to me alone! These are my witnesses to my owning that seat you are in!" . . . Then, the Prince, close to his liberation, undisturbed by any of the obstacles created by Mara, reached down with the simplest possible gesture, that was filled with ease, to touch the ground with the middle finger of his right hand. In doing so, the Buddha called upon the Earth Mother to witness his inalienable right to his Dharma seat. . . . Many times I have found this story of the Buddha's own struggles and difficulties helpful in strengthening my own practice. . . . I recall the resolve and concentration of the Buddha. I invoke the strength of the Buddha and the courage of all peoples who have lived through experiences of suffering and oppression. (Yang 2004, 160–62)

Yang here describes a particular strategy of dealing with racial discrimination in American Buddhist centers and retreats as well as a strategy of situating his own racialized body within the framework of the Buddha's life story. Like black Buddhist authors, Yang identifies a connection between the Buddha and oppressed people, including all people of color. The particularly local problem—the historical institutionalized racism and white supremacy within American Buddhist centers—is given a timeless quality when placed within the framework of the Buddha's life.

The Truth Awakened To

The Buddha's life story, when employed by black Buddhists, becomes the paradigmatic example of a religious figure awakened to the realities of racism and hetero-sexism in society. The idea that the Buddha's awakening was in regards to the illusory nature of race and gender is of central importance in a number of black Buddhist writings. Charles Johnson, for example, employs the doctrine of "two truths" (absolute and relative) to explain the true nature of race. In an article for *Tricycle* in which he discusses Buddhism and social action, Johnson argues that "many Eurocentric whites project fictitious racial 'substance' (or meaning) onto people of color" (Johnson 2006). But, "fortunately, a black American who has been exposed to the Buddha-dharma sees that these racial illusions, so much a part of conventional reality—just as the caste system was in the time of the Buddha—are products of the relative, conditioned mind" (Johnson 2006). Johnson explains that on the level of absolute truth, race does not exist,

but in the realm of relative truth, the illusion that race is a stable, immutable category affects the lived experience of beings. Although white Eurocentric Americans, including Buddhists, are ignorant to the true nature of the self and to reality, black Buddhists, because they are able to deconstruct the illusion of race, have insight into what the Buddha taught.

The Buddha's awakening to the truth of societal suffering due to race, gender, caste, and class is central to williams, Owens, and Syedullah's *Radical Dharma*, in which they write:

It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that the discovery and assertion of Siddhartha Gautama, the historic Buddha—that every human being, irrespective of caste, race, creed, or birth has within them the potential for waking up to the ultimate nature of reality—is one of the most radically life-altering propositions for human life on and in relationship to the planet. One that we need right now. Yet at this time when the Dharma is needed more acutely than ever—a time when our very existence is threatened as a result of our socially embedded greed, hatred, and ignorance—its expansive potential to liberate us from suffering is in danger of being rendered impotent because it is held in subjugation to the very systems that it must thoroughly examine. (williams, Owens, and Syedullah 2016, 2)

The above quotation conveys a sense of urgency, in line with Sharpe's remarks that Buddhism has become entangled in the racist baggage of the West. This call to bring the Buddha's teachings into dialogue with the racial turmoil of the United States is the mission behind the *Radical Dharma* book and 2016 tour. The authors wrote *Radical Dharma* as a challenge to the American Buddhist community to reflect upon how "the Buddhist community is a mirror image" of the racial turmoil of the United States, and a challenge to "kick the habit of racism, cultural dominance, and the upholding of oppressive systems" (williams, Owens, and Syedullah 2016, 2). williams, Owens, and Syedullah draw clear parallels between the Buddha's awakening within his own particular historical context and the urgent need to apply his teachings to Buddhism in the West, which has become subjugated to institutionalized racism. Thus, like other authors, williams, Owens, and Syedullah skillfully weave civil rights issues into stories of the Buddha, thereby employing a romanticized vision of the East against the hegemonic power of a white West—and sangha—that has excluded and marginalized African Americans and black Buddhists. The picture these authors paint is dire. Unless someone with true insight into the wisdom attained by the Buddha intervenes, the Buddhist teaching itself, which reveals the true nature of the self (and embodied identities), will be rendered impotent by white supremacy, imperialism, and hetero-sexism. There is nothing less at stake than the fate of the entire religion,

and with it, human society. According to this logic, for these Buddhists the Buddha was, as Wagner put it, “woke in the deepest possible way,” and was, indeed, “Woke.”

CONCLUSION

Within their life-writings, black Buddhists weave together narratives of race and religion to situate themselves as racialized subjects within an imagined inter-national community situated in a Buddhist worldview. Such narratives are part of a larger black internationalism that envisions communities not just across the Atlantic to Africa, but also across the Pacific to Asia. Black Buddhists are able to participate in these counter-cultural imaginations by articulating a narrative of the Buddha as a fellow person of color who was awakened to the realities of racial oppression.

Although sharing similarities with white Orientalist Americans and Buddhologists, black Buddhist discourse also has its roots in early twentieth century black spiritualists and activists who used Buddhist themes in literature and writing or adopted Oriental personas to circumvent economic hardship and racial discrimination and imagine, in the words of Etsuko Taketani, a black Pacific community. By weaving civil rights issues into stories about the Buddha, black Buddhists are able to employ a romanticized vision of the East against the hegemonic power of a white West that has excluded them. Black Buddhists are further able to combat racial discrimination in local American Buddhist centers by using Buddhist teachings to articulate a theory of race and embodiment. This forces us to reconceptualize our narratives of Buddhism’s transmission to America in favor of narratives that more accurately depict the greater degree of agency black Buddhists had in the translation and construction of Buddhism in America, and that place black Buddhists within the history of African American engagements with Asia.

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